

One hundred years ago this month the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church appointed John Mark King the first Principal of Manitoba College. He made a significant contribution to the Canadian religious scene as theologian, educator and churchman and he still has important things to say to us. He made a profound impression upon his contemporaries but although he is routinely mentioned in historical accounts of the church and education in Western Canada he is certainly not well known among us. With the recent discovery of a large number of letters, sermons and some lectures we are able to gain a much clearer picture of the man, his concerns and his thought. Today, I wish to focus on King as theologian, but first a few words about his life and work as Principal of Manitoba College.

King was born in the village of Yetholm on the Scottish borders in May, 1829. He received the M.A. degree from the University of Edinburgh, studied theology in the Divinity Hall of the United Presbyterian Church and also at the University of Halle in Germany where he came under the influence of such spiritually intense teachers as Tholuck and Julius Müller. The heritage of warm, evangelical piety combined with firmly structured theological thought which in Scotland reached back to the Erskine brothers and found its culminating expression in Thomas Chalmers, received another powerful and attractive articulation in Tholuck and Müller. It is this heritage which has its centre of gravity in the doctrines of sin, grace and regeneration that proved to be the burden of King's teaching, writing and preaching.

In 1856 he came to Canada as a missionary of the United Presbyterian Church and in 1863 he became the minister of Gould Street Church Toronto which eventually became the well known St. James Square Presbyterian Church. For twenty years he exercised in this church a most fruitful and influential ministry. The place he came to occupy in the life of the Church and the wider community may be indicated by the fact that in 1882 Knox College selected him to be the first person upon whom it conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity and in 1883 he was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

The General Assembly of 1883 received a memorial from the Presbyterian Church of Manitoba seeking the appointment of a Principal and Professor of Theology for the new and struggling Manitoba College. The Assembly appointed King and this posed a real dilemma for him. He was not at all sure what to do. His congregation and many others urged him to stay where his influence was already large and established. It was a difficult decision, but the needs of the College and especially the importance of laying a firm foundation for theological education in the promising new land of Western Canada were the sort of claims he could not turn aside.

King's influence upon the community was immediately felt and proved to be of enduring significance. Although Winnipeg was experiencing a severe financial depression following upon the speculative boom in real estate of '82, King vigorously tackled the rather desperate financial situation of the College. He quickly won the confidence of everyone and especially the business community. Discussing his

abilities as a financial administrator, Colin Campbell wrote, "As a rule we do not look for skilled financiers in profound theologians and gifted preachers," but, he added, "Any country would have been honored to have him as finance minister, or any large financial institution as manager."¹ Certainly to appreciate the role King played, full attention would have to be paid to the way in which he raised money throughout Britain and Eastern Canada, the way he handled it, the extraordinary detailed supervision that he gave to everything from the purchase of coal and wood to student accounts. But not only did he get the College on a sound financial basis, he also set high academic standards, proved himself to be a superb teacher, and demonstrated that quality of leadership which called forth the best in faculty and students alike and led the college into what has been called her "golden period".

These were also years of deep personal sorrow. In 1886 Mrs. King died and a little more than a year later his nine year old son, John Ralph, suffered a fatal attack of scarlet fever while King was away on church business. He was profoundly shaken by these losses but in the words of his close friend and colleague Thomas Hart, "His discipline of sorrow seemed to give him a deeper insight into the meaning of life, and to clarify and quicken his views of man's need and God's remedy."²

Throughout the years until his death in March 1899, King carried a very heavy teaching load in both Arts and Theology, handled the affairs of the College down to the details, was active in the life of the community, preached widely and exercised leadership in the courts of

the Church. Responding to the needs of a frontier community in such a way, one would scarcely expect him to keep up with the theological developments of the day. But King did. Indeed the key to understanding him is to see how he engaged the intellectual issues of the day.

However, when we seek to delineate the content of King's theological thought, we are faced with the question of how best to get hold of it. On this subject there are no guides. Those few who have written sketches of his life have uniformly acclaimed him as a theologian whose thought is distinguished by its clarity and depth. But they leave us with adjectives of praise; there have been no attempts to set forth its character. We have two books from King: the lectures on Tennyson's In Memoriam and The Theology of Christ's Teaching, a set of class lectures published posthumously with an Introduction by the Scottish theologian James Orr. However, I think the best and quickest way to get into his thought is to consider some public lectures he gave at the opening of the summer sessions of the College during the nineties. In these lectures he addressed some of those issues which were central to the controversies of the age and to his own concerns. To these lectures, I now turn.

Theological Concerns as Exhibited in Public Lectures

In 1893, King opened the summer session with a lecture entitled "The Spirit in Which Theological Enquiry should be Prosecuted." Clearly the stress of the times has dictated his choice of subject.

Indeed right at that time, although King makes no reference to the fact, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. was meeting to hear and adjudicate the appeal in the case of Charles Briggs.

King's lecture reveals much about the man. He begins by stating that the aim of theological enquiry is "to learn what the actual nature of the revelation is" which is given in Scripture and thus "to ascertain and define religious truth". Since this is its aim, the first requirement "for its prosecution is love of truth." It is a distinction worth pausing over. It has been said of Frederick the Great that properly speaking he was not fond of music but of the flute, and not indeed fond of the the flute but of his flute. Now King's whole being was wrapped up in and committed to what he called the truth of the Christian faith. But here at the outset he is urging that there must be a creative tension between freedom and concern, between the open, critical mind and the committed self. This is a high and rare attainment but he impresses upon those students of theology that "it is a large and an essential element in the spirit which should animate you in the studies to be prosecuted in this place."

The second element in the spirit proper to theological enquiry is "a large degree of caution" in "arriving at and announcing conclusions". Christian theology, for King, is not a harmless subject, remote from the interests and the issues of daily life. Quite the contrary: its "questions touch human experience at the most vital points," and the

manner in which they are understood will have large consequence for the quality of the life, faith and hope of countless people. Moreover, what he calls "the eager, restless spirit of the age" evidenced in the vigorous pursuit of biblical criticism, and the disposition to obscure the church's great affirmation concerning God in Christ itself, carries the demand for an appropriate caution. That which King finds offensive is not so much new views as the presumptuous spirit in which radical new positions are announced with what he calls "an almost ostentatious defiance of the Church's feelings."

He will not, however, offer any protection to the conservative who has closed his mind. The posture of defensiveness, King well knew, is productive of error in all areas of life, but especially in religion. Or as he puts it: "The unreasoning resistance to all change. . . is not one which can be commended. It is not courageous. It has at its root lack of confidence in truth... And it is not wise, any more than it is courageous." Nothing could be more calamitous for the Church King thought than to create a "divorce between itself and the intelligence of the age." Moreover, theological enquiry is not something to be tolerated as a necessary evil; it is to be encouraged. And it is to be encouraged not only in the interests of theological science but "in the interest of spiritual life, with which it might so often seem to be at war." He states this bluntly: "the maintenance of healthful religious life in a community for a lengthened period is incompatible with intellectual slumber." "The connection between

thought and life" between "the play of intelligence and that of moral feeling" he continues, is so close "that we cannot long have the latter without the former. The apologist or preacher who will bless the age must have a spirit at once "philosophic and devout" who has as his aim "seeing deeper into truth, rather than seeing more completely round it, setting it in its due relation to the permanent and universal needs of man ..." That phrase, truth in "relation to the permanent and universal needs of man" is central to King. It is a phrase, that recurs frequently, and is always carrying his most passionate concern. The deepest conviction he has, and the one which integrates his thought, is that it is precisely the great doctrines concerning man's sin, the incarnation, the atonement, and the work of the Holy Spirit which meet man's deep and universal need for meaning, forgiveness, and for vision. That is his central conviction. Because of this, scholars and preachers who impugn or ignore these central doctrines of Christian faith, instead of being up to date are actually ceasing to have a message relevant to man's greatest questions and needs. In this particular lecture, with the British Hegelian and Gifford lecturer, Edward Caird, in mind he asks "...what could a Christianity thus emasculated do for its recipient? How unequal it must prove to the demands of human need".³

The same concerns prompted him to choose the doctrine of The Atonement as his subject for the opening lecture in 1895. This central doctrine is of vast significance for the whole understanding of Christianity and, as he says, it is "as gracious as it is vast" and

it is being either badly misunderstood or "simply put to the side" and he is determined "to show where we stand in this Institution"⁴ on the matter. To be sure, King acknowledges that there are numerous influences accounting for the shift in concern taking place. He points specifically to three: 1) A proper reaction "against a crude, coarse, almost a commercial view of the atonement"; 2) the widespread interest in the historical Christ with its predominantly ethical views of his life and person; and 3) the fact that many feel the lack of a clear connection between belief in the doctrine and the development of personal goodness that must be the living result of faith.⁵ These protests represent a positive gain. Nevertheless, he stresses that an understanding of Christianity that does not have this doctrine at its centre goes against the "whole drift and tenor" of Scriptural teaching, fails "to supply any adequate reason for the Incarnation", and proceeds on "a radically defective view" of the human condition.⁶ The ethical, humanitarian emphasis coming to the fore in theological circles possesses real strength, but it has a fatal weakness: it is, as he puts it, not "adequate to the full strain of human need".⁷ This old doctrine of the atonement, of Christ's sacrificial and sin-bearing love is the truth that meets man's situation. "To preach", he says, "with this truth left out", in however cultured and gracious a style is—to use the apt illustration of Mr. Denney's fisherman—to fish with a hook without a barb. Men will take your bait: the age is in love with moralizing discourse; but you will not take the men."⁸ It was an eloquent and strongly argued lecture and would appear to have received considerable attention. At least Mr. W.E. Dodge, a trustee of Union

Theological Seminary in New York, wrote him a letter and ordered a hundred copies to be distributed to the advanced students of that seminary.⁹

King returned to a similar issue in 1897 in a lecture entitled "The Purely Ethical Gospel Examined." It is, perhaps, the finest in this series of public lectures. Ethical concerns were, of course, central to King and he acknowledges that there have been positive gains made in recent years in gaining a fuller recognition for the ethical dimensions of the gospel than in former periods of the Church's history. Nevertheless, a purely ethical Christianity which seems to be gaining such popularity "is seriously and painfully defective, if it does not indeed change the centre altogether, and thus throw even the truths which it retains out of their proper relations."¹⁰ Its deficiencies are closely interrelated, and they are visible in all crucial areas. Its view of man is sentimental, lacking in realism and "not set" as he puts it, "to the key-note supplied by the [Pauline] Epistles."¹¹ In the writings of St. Paul, "Sin is ...not a mere weakness, a simple defect" but an "enslaving power which has seated itself at the very centre of man's being..."¹² The moralism of this ethical approach is such that it fails to understand sin properly in relational terms with the result that what is lost to view, he says, is "the alienation from God which is at its heart..."¹³ It is perhaps important to say that King, in stressing the reality and dynamics of sin, is not at all concerned to emphasize the littleness of man. Quite the contrary: he is urging his readers to see man in the full dimensions

of his being, in his capacity for both good and evil, what Pascal called the grandeur and the misery of man. It is in his relationship to God that we see the full measure of man's loss indicated by the word sin and also his true greatness pointed to in the word regeneration. The inevitable consequence of this misreading of the human condition is the obscuring of the necessity for, and greatness of, Christ's work in redemption and regeneration. And further, such a reduced Gospel cannot, he thinks, be expected to nurture a piety of great depth or earnestness. "Where it is in the ascendant, religious life will be apt to droop, or to degenerate into something little better than a moral cult."¹⁴ Indeed, he goes on, "if I could believe that it was to become the prevailing type of teaching within the Churches (of the Reformation), I could anticipate nothing else than their signal and continuous decline."¹⁵

In these three lectures King addressed a few of the hotly debated issues of his day and in the process clearly revealed where he stood. He was conservative, he stood "in the old paths", but he was not narrow. He knew modern thought, he was open to its strengths, and he saw with exceptional clarity its weaknesses. There are no doubt many reasons why the Canadian churches did not suffer anything like the deep cleavage over the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that the American churches did, but surely one reason was the presence in our theological colleges of open-minded conservatives like John Mark King. Indeed, I have recently learned that this same evaluation of King was made by no less a figure than George Adam Smith. King had managed to secure Smith

to lecture at the Summer School in Manitoba College, and on the train on the morning that Smith left Winnipeg, he wrote a very moving letter to King. I quote but one short paragraph:

"I thank you very affectionately for your generous trust of me and my efforts. I am fully aware that a great deal in the somewhat bungling attempts of us younger men to obtain fresh conceptions of God's truth must seem crude & raw to the larger experience of our elders. But if there is anything that will keep us sober & cautious it is the sympathy & confidence of older men like yourself, whose knowledge of God's word & experience of the religious life is so much deeper than our own can be."¹⁶

King regarded theology as a very practical as well as an intellectually demanding discipline. He often urged his students to preach the great doctrines, not, he always stressed, as pieces of an abstract system of thought, but in the most intimate relation to man's universal need for meaning, consolation and regeneration. Only the great doctrines were adequate "to the full strain of human need." King's own sermons are rich in theological content and indeed are an important resource for his own theological thought. Time does not permit our entering into this resource but I would draw your attention to a single passage from one of his sermons. It will remind us that long before there were thinkers like Anders Nygren to draw the distinction between Agape and Eros, King was making it with precision in a sermon to a frontier people. This is how he put it:

"Our love needs to be stimulated by the presence of qualities in others, fitted to call it forth.

Our compassion waits to be evoked by the sight of misery or destitution. It has its seat within us, indeed; but its moving cause without. It is not its own ground. We have not grasped that which is highest and most distinctive in

the love of God, on the other hand, until we have apprehended the truth, that it has no motive external to Himself; that it has its ground in His own nature. It is not purchased for us by Christ, for Christ Himself is its expression. He is love's gift. It is still less procured by our goodness, our obedience... [or] our faith, for it is antecedent to all of these; their sole ground and cause where they exist; the sole hope of their origination, where they do not exist."¹⁷

After King's death in 1899, Father Drummond of St. Boniface College spoke of his association with King, the philosophical discussions they had had, and how he a Roman Catholic felt more at home with his thought than he did with that of most non-Catholic thinkers. He spoke also of King's intellectual power and his capacity to inspire a zeal in his students for philosophical study, and then he continued on to say that "the University has lost in Dr. King a representative of old world culture, whose opinions had great weight with the more thoughtful members of our body."¹⁸ That points to something basic about Principal King. For King's genius was to hold together qualities which frequently get separated. He was "a representative of old-world culture" and that brought a richness to this new and bustling land. But he was no alien misfit: he embraced this new frontier, had a vision for it and gave himself unstintingly to its people. This quality of holding together what frequently gets separated marked the whole of his life. The union "of intellectual and moral excellence", the combination of "firm convictions with broad views and warm sympathies" that characterized those he most admired, he also embodied. He once told his students that the apologist or preacher who will

"bless the age" "must have a spirit at once philosophic and devout."
This was his own achievement and through it he blessed both church
and the wider community in those formative years.

NOTES

1. Colin H. Campbell, Q.C. in "In Memoriam: John Mark King", The Manitoba College Journal, Memorial Number, p. 161.
2. Rev. Professor Hart in *ibid.*, p. 181.
3. This and the preceding quotations are from "The Spirit in Which Theological Enquiry Should be Prosecuted", The Manitoba College Journal, Vol. 8, no. 6, July, 1893.
4. The Rev. Principal King: The Atonement, The Stovel Co., Printers and Stationers, Winnipeg, 1895, p. 4, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12ff.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16ff.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
9. Letter from W.E. Dodge to King, dated August 4, 1895.
10. The Rev. Principal King, The Purely Ethical Gospel. The Stovel Co., Printers and Stationers, Winnipeg 1897, p. 14.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
16. Letter from George Adam Smith to John Mark King, dated "On the Train", June 29 [no year].
17. From a sermon on I John 4:16 "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us."